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THURSDAY HIGHLIGHTS

* Secretary-General says international community must launch major initiative to prevent another tragedy in Great Lakes region of Africa and promote dialogue in Burundi.

* Canada will not participate in renewed UNAMIR and will withdraw its contingent; says Security Council has not absorbed lessons from recent peace-keeping operations.

* United Nations on brink of financial collapse because of failure of Members to fulfil obligations; alternative sources of revenue would still be controlled by Member States, UN spokesman says.

* Secretary-General appeals for immediate release of hostages, including UNESCO staff member, being held in Irian Jaya province of Indonesia.

* New UNTAES Administrator is optimistic transition from Serbian occupation to Croatian sovereignty in Eastern Slavonia will be successful; receives assurances from both Croatian and Serbian Presidents.

* WFP raises desperately needed funds to feed millions facing starvation in Democratic People's Republic of Korea; new aid sufficient for only two months.

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It was imperative for the international community to launch a major initiative to prevent another tragedy in the Great Lakes region of Africa and promote dialogue across the entire Burundian political spectrum, according to Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali. In a letter to the Security Council, dated 17 January, the Secretary-General reported on the recent mission by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Sadako Ogata.

(more)

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Mrs. Ogata said continued humanitarian aid was essential to help Burundian nationals and foreign refugees affected by more than two years of uninterrupted regional turmoil. If aid was completely suspended because of deteriorating security, then the effects on lives, health, general welfare and population displacements could well lead to a massive emergency which would further destabilize Burundi and the Great Lakes region.

The High Commissioner recommended dispatching an urgent technical mission to examine ways to improve existing security, including the limited deployment of United Nations guards to protect UN personnel and premises. She also recommended expanding the application of the Convention on the Safety and Security of United Nations personnel and Associated Personnel to cover activities in Burundi. There should be closer cooperation between the UN and military observers from the Organization of African States (OAU), so they could liaise between the humanitarian community and the Burundian security forces, she said.

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Canada has decided not to participate in the recently renewed United Nations Assistance Mission in Rwanda (UNAMIR) and will withdraw the main body of its contingent and military observers by 2 February. In a letter to the Secretary-General, dated 17 January, Canada's Permanent Representative, Robert Fowler, said UNAMIR's new mandate was not viable, given the authorized force structure. Last December, he had pointed out to the Security Council that to reduce UNAMIR's strength by one third, while maintaining its earlier mandate would create false expectations of what the Mission could realistically achieve.

Ambassador Fowler said his Government was concerned that the Security Council had not yet fully absorbed lessons from recent peace-keeping operations. He said Canada's decision to withdraw from UNAMIR should not be construed as lessening its willingness to participate in the search for stability and security in the Great Lakes region of Africa, or its commitment to assist the Rwandan Government to rebuild its devastated country. Canada was committed to improving the way United Nations peace-keeping operations were planned, deployed and conducted.

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The Secretary-General had repeatedly brought the attention of Member States to the very critical financial situation facing the United Nations, a spokesman for the Organization said today. He had encouraged discussion on a number of far-reaching suggestions to alleviate the problem and alternative sources of finance to UN programmes and activities had been recommended by many commissions and study groups over the years. The Secretary-General's recent suggestions in London should be considered against this background and in the context of trying to run an Organization effectively and efficiently when he is denied the resources to do so.

(more)

The spokesman said if Member States agreed to alternative sources of revenue, expenditure would still be totally in their control. The Secretary-General would not suggest any changes in the current financing procedure, which was basic to all inter-governmental organizations, comprised of and controlled by sovereign States. Attention should be focused on the main issue, which was that the United Nations now stood at the brink of financial collapse because of the failure of Member States to fulfil their legal obligations, she said.

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The Secretary-General has called for the immediate release of hostages being held by a group in Irian Jaya province of Indonesia, a United Nations spokesman said today. A staff member from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) was among those being held. The hostages were engaged in activities supporting environmental conservation in the region when they were seized and the Secretary-General has appealed for an early and peaceful settlement of the problem, the Spokesman said.

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The United Nations should succeed in helping the transition from Serbian occupation to Croatian sovereignty in Eastern Slavonia, correspondents were told at a Headquarters briefing today. The new Administrator for the United Nations Transitional Administration for Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and Western Sirmium (UNTAES), Jacques Klein (United States) said he had received assurances from both Croatian President Franjo Tudjman and Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic that they were committed to the process. It was in their mutual interest to ensure an economic and peaceful solution, revitalize the region and get on with being part of Europe.

Demilitarization could not take place until UNTAES's military entity was operationally ready to assume command and control of the region, Mr. Klein said. The troop force needed to guarantee security was being put together, with Belgium providing the commander and a headquarters capability. Interaction between the Implementation Force (IFOR) and UNTAES in the region was important as both were part and parcel of the post-Dayton peace process. If one did not work, then neither would the other.

Timing was key, he continued, because on the Croatian side there was a sense of urgency to get on with the process, while the Serbian side wanted moderation to ensure the dignity and civil rights of Serbs native to the region, which UNTAES would guarantee. However, the economy and reconciliation between the two peoples were more important than the military equation. Local Serbs had suffered four years of economic deprivation and there was massive unemployment. They realized their future was in Croatia and wanted the United Nations to facilitate reintegration as Croatian sovereignty was introduced.

Similarly, Croats wanted help to return to the region and re-establish themselves in their former properties. They were already preparing to reintegrate post, telephone, commerce, rail and were willing to invest money. He stressed that the economic process was particularly important, as demilitarization took place and militias needed incentives to disarm.

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The World Food Programme (WFP) today announced it has raised enough funds to keep its operations in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea running till the end of March. Programme officials said a further $1 million had been denoted by Switzerland and Norway. Despite urgent appeals for aid, only Denmark and Finland had previously contributed $505,000.

The WFP's Executive Director, Catherine Bertini, said that the funds would buy a little time, but much more was needed as several million people were at risk of starvation, including 2.5 million women and children. Programme field workers describe horrendous conditions in flood stricken areas, with old women foraging fields and digging into underground animal burrows for roots and seeds to eat. Significant funding will be needed for WFP's $8.8 million plan to feed 500,000 flood victims for just 90 days. To date, only $1.5 million has been committed.

The operations began after an unprecedented Government appeal for international assistance and they mark the first time United Nations food aid has been sent to the country. The WFP has been given access to remote regions, never visited by international humanitarian agencies, to monitor food distribution.

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